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*Special Papers and Research Reports*

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# The Authority of the Laity

Verna J. Dozier  
with Celia A. Hahn



Resources for people who care about congregations.

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## Foreword

Ministry of the Laity. Lay ministry. Laos.

Why is it that the more that is written about these, the more things stay the same?

No area of Christian life has been more deeply thought about, worked at, written about, conferenced about, than this. Sermons are preached about it; keynote speeches are given about it; books are written about it; careers are made on it; courses are organized around it; study guides are prepared and sold. Without this topic, half the religious publishers would be in trouble.

Yet...yet...what is changed?

Either we are dealing with so deep a mystery that it cannot be comprehended or dealt with, or the fog is too thick for us to see the right issues. I have long suspected that the latter is the case.

That is why five years ago I asked Verna Dozier, a brilliant lay theologian, to ponder that question. What I told her was that we needed something to take the place of Hendrik Kraemer's *The Theology of the Laity* (Westminster Press, 1958). I told her I did not think the book could be written by a clergy-person. This book is her response.

Do not expect this book to fit traditional theological categories. Verna is one of the most penetrating theologians I know, but she does not use the scholastic categories. She knows the Bible more fundamentally than anyone I know, clergy or lay; but she does not use it fundamentalistically, nor even like most clergy. You are not likely to agree with all she says. I certainly do not. But where I do not, I must admit I'm trying to rethink very carefully what I do think.

What is important about this book is that Verna Dozier is trying to cut through the fog by doing something different.

I have suspected for a long time that there is no massive mystery in the problem of the ministry of the laity, and why it is not exercised more freely and clearly by the members of the laos. The problem is the fog caused by the built-in clericalism of Church structures. That clericalism hides a caste system, a power system, in theological fog words and structures impenetrable except to the elite power caste -- those who rule the Churches: bishops, executives, clergy, professors, pet lay people.

Why did women accept a subservient role in society for so many generations? Why did Blacks accept a second-class citizenship for so many centuries? Because it was in the self-interest of the power systems operating in society to keep issues blurred, fuzzy, hard-to-get-a-handle-on. When "uplift" women or Blacks arose, they were occasionally accepted and

## Author's note

Speaking comes easily for me, but writing is another matter. People often suggested to me that the way I could write a book would be to talk into a tape recorder, transcribe the tape, and -- presto! -- I'd have a book. Celia Hahn and I can testify that it is not that easy. This book began with three pages in which I wrote all I could write about the subject. This brief summary seemed to divide itself into four distinct parts, and Celia and I had two-hour conversations about each one. These conversations were transcribed, and out of the confusion and incoherence of the transcriptions this book finally emerged.

I wish to express appreciation to the many people who helped these ideas of mine, often heard, now to be seen.

Chief among them is Loren Mead, who believed I had something to say worth printing and has been steadfast in his support, encouragement, and wisdom. I am also very grateful to John Fletcher, Pat Drake, Bart Lloyd, and Bobbi McKenna, whose careful and critical reading of the manuscript improved the presentation; and to Geri Hobdey, whose enthusiastic typing cheered my soul.



fetted, sometimes given honorary doctorates and made pets of the power system, which then sat back and enjoyed the fulminations of the pets, proving their broadmindedness and liberality by listening to diatribes against themselves.

The Church's power system is clericalism. It is a system that is crumbling at the edges and shows great weakness at the core. The denominations with the greatest clarity about identifying power with clerical status may well be in for the most painful decades before long. The problem is clericalism, not clergy. (Analogously, the problem is racism, not Black people, not white people. The problem is sexism, not men, not women.) Similarly, clericalism is a whole system that traps clergy and laity into institutional power relations that sustain a superior/inferior class distinction. The clergy and laity I know take turns fighting the system and being victimized by it, resisting the system and colluding with it. No one is without fault. I think it unlikely that the system will be changed without change from both clergy and laity. Perhaps painful change.

The issue for the Church is how to help both clergy and laity to tease apart the functions of institutional power and religious authority. The work of the Institute has led us to see that the interaction of roles, clergy and lay, generates religious growth and nurture. Within the Church we tend to see little importance to "lay ministry" by itself, or to "ordained ministry" by itself: the issue for us is the interaction of the two.

Can there really be a Church in which both clergy and laity fully live into their religious authority, bearing their differing roles, and in the dialogue building up the Body?

Verna Dozier thinks so, and in this book she talks about it. But in this book she cuts through the fog of words by doing something different.

She not only talks about the authority of the laity, she takes it. This book demonstrates the authority of the laity.

Things are not likely to change unless other laity go beyond the arguments and cut through the fog by taking their own authority as Verna Dozier has done.

Loren B. Mead -  
Executive Director, The Alban Institute, Inc.

## 1. The People of God Diverted

The Church is upside down

A funny thing happened on the way to the Kingdom. The Church, the people of God, became the Church, the institution.

I had the unhappy experience recently of hearing a capable, intelligent woman executive say how insignificant she felt in a meeting with some distinguished clergy. She said, "I felt I had no ground on which to stand that was important enough to claim their attention." Tragic. Her very being was ground for claim to their attention! She was the reason for their existence. How topsy-turvy it has all become!

Unfortunately I often feel more alone and isolated when I am with institutional church groups than when I as a Black am with all White groups or when I as a woman am with all male groups. Consciousness raising has produced enough with Whites and men that they at least understand, even if they do not heed, the protest I bring from my sex and my race. The cry that I raise from my lay consciousness is not even understood by many in the institutional church -- either clergy or laity!

People are more likely to talk about "lay ministry" than about the ministry of the laity, and I think appropriately so because it is something very different! In the clerical mind, "lay ministry" ranges all the way from "finding something for the lay people to do" to "getting some help with the work because I can't do it all." In the minds of most laity, "lay ministry" means being let in on the institution's work -- or being trapped into it.

To me the ministry of the laity is not parish renewal nor liturgical reform nor sharing the ministry. All of these may be a part of it, but all of these are shifting the cargo in the ship. For me, the ministry of the laity means changing the port toward which the ship is headed.

This is not the first time the ship has been diverted from its course. Long ago Israel, the chosen people, became Israel, the nation. Amos and a long line of prophets following him cried out, "We've missed the mark! This is not what it is all about."

I want to raise the question of mission. What are we about? What are we called to? And what does that say about our basic understanding of ourselves?

For me the problem is that Church has come to mean institution and not people -- not the people of God. I do not think that most people, in response to the question "What is the Church?" would answer "the people of God." They (accurately) view the Church as an institution with a professional hier-



archy, concerned about maintaining itself. That is what institutions are always all about. They could not possibly be about anything else. And their contact with the world outside of them is designed to maintain themselves. That is one reason why evangelism has gone astray, as I see it. Evangelism has become putting people in the pews; it has become equated with church growth because numbers are necessary to maintain the institution.

Lay people err in the direction of idolization of the institution by the deference they pay to clergy. Laity see clergy as somehow being privy to esoteric knowledge that is very important for life after death or very important for comfort in this world. Lay people believe that the clergy have the inside track to that kind of knowledge and that lay people must be enough in touch with the clergy to assure themselves of safety after death and comfort in this world. Most people seem to think the Bible is some kind of magic book containing the secret of how to live my life. When I am in trouble, if I can decipher that secret everything will be all right. When I fall sick or somebody in my family falls sick, that secret is the magic by which I can make them get well. It is widely accepted that the church holds that kind of secret because there was a time in the history of the church when church people had the power to make sick people get well. We have now for the most part lost that secret, though clergy, it is believed, have a better chance to break the code than laity.

That approach of reading the Bible to recapture the magic started very early in the church; it is not just a twentieth-century American invention, as we sometimes suppose. We now inherit a malaise of the church that began a long time ago. Periodically the Church has fought battles to break out of that bondage to "magical" thinking, with its implicit dependence on clergy. But each time, when the victory was won, almost as soon as the battle was over the victory was institutionalized. I always think with great sorrow of how people lost their lives so that the Bible could be translated into the language of the people. That battle was fought and those people were willing to die because they understood that the Bible contained no magic remedy, but a life-giving message that people needed to have in their own language. The tragedy was that the message was never released. People were too firmly in the habit of letting somebody else do the deciphering of the mysteries for them. Although the Bible was put into the language of the laity, the laity still would not accept the responsibility for learning how to use it.

Another battle was fought to open the Lord's table so that everybody could partake of the bread and the wine. That very important battle was won. But the end result was institutional: now you have a church that gives communion in both kinds

and a church that doesn't, and that's all the victory has now amounted to.

It is an old, old struggle that we are talking about, and a struggle that threatens to continue, because we are trying to change a centuries-old way of responding.

Interestingly enough, those battles were fought by the very people who were the leaders of the institution, by enlightened clergy who saw that something was seriously wrong in the Church. Lay people never really participated in those reforms because they had long since given up believing that the Church was anything in which they really had any ownership. Laity were always the recipients of the Church's bounty. They were the objects. The institution's history has been dominated by that kind of theology.

To turn all that history around is very difficult. Both lay people and clergy have a hard time understanding what I am talking about. It sounds heretical. I believe that in the Bible we have only one part of the story, though I know that is not an idea that people are going to warm to. The Church has always acted as if one needs to know nothing outside of the Biblical record. The theory about the inerrancy of the Bible got its strength from people's fear that if part of the structure was attacked the whole thing would come tumbling down. As if that structure was something that could be destroyed! The Bible was rarely understood as the response of people who saw God acting in history. You could tear apart all those records that are left to us and not destroy that witness. We can sweep the house clean of all the ideas that we have had about the Bible and the Church and fill it with a new content. Most people do not see that. We cannot bear the void. We think that if we sweep the house clean, the devils are going to rush in immediately, but the story is that the devils rush in only if the house is left empty.

#### Servants of God or servants of the status quo?

We can fill the record with a new understanding of its content; an understanding that will itself be a new response to that revelation: that God came into history to create a people who would change the world, who would make the world a place where every person knew that he or she was loved, was valued, had a contribution to make, and had just as much right to the riches of the world as every other person. That is what the Church is all about, to bring into being that vision, that ideal community of love in which we all are equally valuable and in which we equally share. Every structure of life comes under the judgment of that vision: our politics, our economics, our education, our social structures. Even the Church! Nothing is exempt from that challenge. Every member of the



Church who lives and works in any of those structures or any combination of those structures is called to carry the message that this structure will be redeemed to the glory of God.

But lay people have very little idea of that high calling. True religion binds together and undergirds all the structures of society as the redeemed people of God infiltrate those structures, changing the world. We act as if religion were a compartment separate from those structures. I think the first Christians were all excited about the promise of making a difference, of changing the world. The ecclesiastical structures had not yet emerged, but they were not long in emerging. They were in place before the Biblical record was all written down. The problem -- now as then -- is holding the structures under judgment. Not that ecclesiastical structures in themselves are evil, rather they are always under judgment. The structures are there, not for themselves, but in order that the people of God may be let loose into the world.

We have turned the whole thing upside down. Instead of the structures being tools to help the people, the people became subservient to the structures. Then the Church as a structure among structures gave up its power. The Church as one structure became subservient to another power: to kings. It became the handmaiden of the State. The Church lost its vision of being a disturber of the status quo and became a supporter of the status quo. In the movie "Breaker Morant" the priest blessed the troops that were going out to fight a "holy war." He said, "God can use to His purposes war as well as peace." The reason the Church got into the business of supporting "holy wars" was that kings were determined to have wars and anybody who said war was wrong was going to be executed, exiled, or rendered irrelevant.

In those days kings held the power of the structures. In our day the industrialists, the financiers, and the great corporate managers hold the reins of power. And the Church goes along with the structures of power. A comforting message is: "If you are really living a good Christian life you will be successful in business. You will be the chairman of the board or an executive." That is one way in which the Church has gone along with the structures in our time as in other times the Church went along with other structures. The Church, having become just one institution among many, had to bow down and support one of those structures in order even to maintain its life. Those kings and those financiers became most significant. The Church became irrelevant. The Church as a structure became subservient to the principalities and powers -- then, and again now.

### "On the reservation": a tame Christianity

If the true business of religion is to search for some truth about how the whole of life fits together and how we might live it, it simply cannot be just one department alongside others. Religion cannot be the glue if it is one of the pieces.

I can remember when I used to go to youth camp, the leaders showed a little diagram. One side of the triangle was personal life; one represented work; another, Church. Church was always just one of the sides. Or people divide life into religious, intellectual, and social aspects. Again religion is just one of the aspects. The whole idea that religion is the totality of life is completely lost.

Bishop Spong's book *The Hebrew Lord* has a fascinating series of drawings that shows the movement from the Hebrew understanding of life to the Greek idea. To the Hebrew, the human situation was enveloped by God. The Greek saw the human situation as "down here"; God, "up there." Where the two touched was "religion." That's very different from the image of the whole of life as religious. If you tell most people that the whole of life is religious, they think of somebody who gets up in the morning and says prayers, stops in the afternoon and says prayers, says prayers again at night, wears a cross and says the Jesus prayer. We seldom recall that being religious means that our whole life is so ordered that every moment we are aware that we are not the final explanation for ourselves. It means that the ethics that control our work are the ethics of a servant, because we are not our own masters. It means that our relationships to our fellow human beings are under the lordship of our Creator -- whether we're married to those fellow humans or whether we are their parents, or are their friends or co-workers. We do not have to stop and think about being religious because that is the way our lives are lived.

The covenant image of the Old Testament means all of this. Amos inveighed against every part of the Hebrew people's life because they had lost their awareness of being the people of God. Isaiah proclaimed the judgment of God: "even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood." (1:15) The prophets railed against religious activity as a substitute for a religiously aware life. Very early in the Church's history people who wanted that totality of religious life were separated off into convents and monasteries. They were called the "religious." It was not expected that other people would participate in that total offering of life. The sense that all of life is played out before God was lost for ordinary people.

When chancel dramas in Washington churches first started,



people wanted to put on "religious dramas," so they chose religious plays like "Murder in the Cathedral" and "Everyman." At St. Mark's Church we wanted to do plays by Arthur Miller and Ionesco. We put on a play by Miller in which the set showed delapidated housing, a lavatory on stage and inhumane working conditions. People were offended because they thought it was so inappropriate to show things like that in church. Very often churches allowed that sort of drama to be performed in the parish hall but not in the chancel, not in front of the altar. There was an idea that somehow you kept that kind of activity a secret from God. Nowadays that attitude is less common. We used to think we had to walk into the nave with hushed whispers and come before God with our Sunday best dress on. The fact that God was where we were in the world, in the office on Monday, at the party on Friday, in the cellar on Saturday, was somehow not recognized.

At a conference for women married to clergy the conversation turned to their sexual life. They had difficulty talking about their sexual life. When the discussion did turn in that direction, one woman said her husband was pastor of a church that met in their house for worship. She said living in the church really affected her married life because "after all the Host was in the house and you couldn't have sex with the Host in the house." It was apparently not part of her awareness that anywhere she had sex, God would be there. That is the kind of separation we have created -- a separation that is not only ridiculous but harmful because it legitimizes keeping important parts of our life away from God -- as if we could! We murmur sweet prayers on Sunday morning that do not affect what we do when we go off into the voting booths on Tuesday. We vote our own self interest and greed in that voting booth on Tuesday as if we had never prayed about being members of one another on Sunday.

#### Flight from ambiguity

Why have we strayed so far afield from where the Church started? For me the answer lies in our great human need for definite answers. We resist living with the doubt, incompleteness, confusion, and ambiguity that are inescapable parts of the life we are called to live. Living by faith means living in unsureness. We cannot bear the uncertainties with which the gospel message calls us to live. We cannot bear having to take a risk that this is the way to go. We cannot bear our inability to know absolutely. So we hurry up and create some certainties that will relieve us of that anxiety. The temptation in the Garden of Eden is that "you will be as gods," knowing all things, and we succumb to that temptation all the time.

Clergy often fall prey to the illusion that they do have the answers. Sometimes the laity encourage that illusion. Often in a church conference when we divide into small groups, clergy refuse to participate in the small groups because they think that they have the answers and they will overpower the laity. Withdrawing from the groups, of course, suggests that they are different, that they do have the answers. I was working with a group once that I had worked with many times before. We had had wonderful times and lots of participation. A bishop came to visit and he just sat there silent. The discussion was killed because the people felt there was one present who had the right answers. Afterwards the Bishop and I talked about the event. He felt that if he kept silent his power as an authority figure would be less oppressive. I felt that his silence made him more of an authority figure, and that he would have been part of the group if he had risked participation like everyone else. Of course there are some bishops who wouldn't be able to risk participating in that way. They would make a few speeches and come across as if they were the authority. But there are some bishops who can participate as one of the people.

What gives clergy the feeling that they ought to know everything? All too often lay people give them that feeling, and clergy feel guilty if they don't meet those unreal expectations.

Another problem is that lay people need to be experts both in their own vocational area and in theology. Laity really need to know what God has done in Christ, as profoundly as any ordained minister; and then they need to know their own discipline as well. Clergy need to know that there are other areas of expertise. But clergy do not need to be experts in those areas. So lay people really have the harder job. No one wants a harder job, so it becomes easy to give up and say, "I'll just take care of my profession, and leave the profession of ministry to the ordained person." So the whole structure communicates to the lay person, "You do not know," and the lay person replies, "Yes, I do not know." Of course the lay person really does have to know. One has to "know whom you have believed," and that means knowing not only in the Biblical sense of participating in a reality but also in the intellectual sense of being able to say to someone else what that gospel is. It is the task of the clergy to be sure that the people with whom they work do know what their faith is all about. Clergy are called to be rabbis. Rabbis do not profess to have any more spiritual genius than the congregation; they merely profess to have the learning. The learning that lay people themselves need is really not academic learning. No lay person has to know Greek or the history of the Church or all the arguments that the church fathers put forward. They



do need to know the gospel story. The training of the clergy should give them a set of tools for helping lay people know that story, the story of the people of God.

Periodically the Christian Church produces prophets who say there is something fundamentally wrong with the direction we have taken. One of the most eloquent of these is Hendrik Kraemer. In 1958 he wrote a profound little book which he called *A Theology of the Laity*. In a very learned way Kraemer re-  
views the theological struggle with the issue of the laity.

The general conclusion that can be drawn (he says) is that for the greater part of its history Church thinkers have provided little place for the laity in their understanding of salvation or of the Church. At best the laity was the flock; always it was object, never subject with its own calling and responsibility. In the Protestant Reformation, a strong vindication of the laity as subject and not merely object was made, but it broke down in concrete reality for two reasons. On one hand, the laity were generally unable to function according to their biblical calling. On the other hand, the Church was preoccupied with the nature and function of the ordained ministry. Though there was an attempt to reshape the theology of the ministry, the new ministers were, in sociological and psychological reality, a metamorphosis of the former clergy. Milton said, "New presbyter is but old priest writ large." The priestly, sacramental notions related to the clergy were of course largely eliminated and reinterpreted in religious-moral terms; but in actual fact the "standing" and "apartness" of the new "ministry" were in many respects similar to those of the former "priesthood."

That temptation to establish a "set apart" ministry of the ordained haunts the church. We have great difficulty grasping the idea that all of us are called, all of us are ministers. If a lay person evidences a particular interest in Bible study or theology, soon someone is bound to ask, "Have you ever thought about being ordained?" -- as if only the clergy needed to know their spiritual roots. Or we promote special orders and ranks of laity -- a sort of religious version of "all are equal but some are more equal than others."

Kraemer goes on to his basic point: The Church is Ministry. He prefers to use the Greek word for ministry, *diakonia* ("serving"). Kraemer says the *diakonia* of the Church is correlative to and rooted in the *diakonia* of Christ. The ministry of the ordained clergy and the ministry of the laity are both aspects of the same *diakonia*, each in their proper sphere and calling. (p. 143) He moves on to identify that "proper sphere and calling." "The main part of the ministry of the clergy should be to enable the laity to fulfill their peculiar, inalienable ministry." (Italics mine. P. 167) Kraemer spells out how the Church carries out that enabling function: "Not as a

haven of refuge, which is in most cases another form of escapism, of letting the world go to the devil. But as the nourishing and understanding mother, the community which by prayer, sacrament and ways of true fellowship sustains its members in the battle. (p. 175)

The more recent thinking of the Grubb Institute in Great Britain speaks to this point. Grubb Institute theorist Bruce Reed describes\* the way we oscillate between "intradependence," the mode of being sure and competent and equal to what is required of us, to "extradependence," the mode of being needy and drained and not equal to any challenge. In that latter mode Christians turn to the Church (remember Kraemer's image of the "nourishing and understanding mother.") When the Church is healthy, and the clergy are in their proper calling and role, the needy are cared for, the drained are replenished, and the droopy reminded who they are and to what they have been called. Back to the battle they can go, strengthened for diakonia. Reed describes this as "controlled regression." "Contained regression," the unhealthy manifestation, keeps one trapped in that warm cozy community, and both clergy and laity forget their high calling.

"Contained regression" is as if a shop in the business of repairing broken down buggies became so fascinated with the apparatus of repairing the buggies and so proud of the rehabilitated buggies that it disdained returning them to the customers, who went on to motor cars and airplanes while the factory workers, happily unaware, spent their time perfecting their repairing technology and looking for more broken down buggies to fix.

Kraemer has a stinging insight on this point. The institutional Church, in an effort to fulfill her prophetic role in society, has issued many pronouncements on the great topics of the day. "But," he contends, "if the laity of the Church, dispersed in and through the world, are really what they are called to be, the real uninterrupted dialogue between Church and world happens through them. They form the daily repeated projection of the Church into the world." (p. 170)

Such a ringing call as Kraemer's should have made a difference, but the religious situation is not a lot different today than it was when he wrote, over two decades ago.

The situation has not changed because the institutional Church has a vested interest in its not changing. Changes threaten the institution. In Martin Luther the Roman Catholic Church saw the threat of its own demise. Its leaders did not have enough vision to see that someone was bound to start a counter-reformation and keep the Roman Catholic Church in

\*The Task of the Church and the Role of Its Members, Alban In-  
stitute, 1975.



place. For every Pope John, you have a Pope Paul. But there is always a potential threat. Jesus was a threat to the synagogue in his day. Every institution strives to maintain itself, to insure its own safety and stability and protect itself from threats. All organisms try to survive. No organism yearns to follow the example of the dinosaurs. Institutions can change, though very slowly. Of course many people do not want institutions to change. They hope that the structures of society will give them some stability. One hears people wailing because society's institutions are breaking down. They find that fact very threatening. They have never heard "Behold, I am doing a new thing." Christianity should be troubling: it should threaten every institution.

All structures, principalities, and powers stand under judgment -- even when the structure is the Church. There is a way to be a part of an institution under judgment. There is a way to belong to an institution and maintain some tension, so that we can measure it by its declared purposes and look at the possibility that the institution may be in error. When we can do those things, we are no longer captives of the institution. God always has thousands who "have not bowed the knee to Baal" and thousands who have not accepted institutions as the idol that the institutions would like to be. We do not know who all those people are. We do know they come from every Christian tradition, and that many of them are clergy or even bishops who have broken the mold in one way or another. There are models for living in tension. But I would not for one minute want to institutionalize the models. When we work frantically to institutionalize the way we live in tension, we fall into creating another institution, which is what Protestantism has done continually. Every time a Protestant body has broken out of the tradition to uphold some new insight we have set up another denomination. Or "restructured" an old one. Over and over we show that we are not willing to live in the uncertainty. We grasp that new insight and hold onto it anxiously. We have to see ourselves reproduced in order to know that we are right. Then the vision is lost again.

Kraemer said that when Church bodies deliberate, the world is out of sight. The only concern seems to be continuity with the past. The new challenges come from the present and the future, and the Church's intensive concern about continuity with the past, always looking back to see how it was done back there at the beginning, is a force that presses in the direction of institutionalization rather than in the direction of living in the tension by faith. We are called to walk by faith. We cannot do that if we are unwilling to live in uncertainty; we willfully grasp "a piece of the rock."

So the Christian Church, in its very basic manifestations, continually denies its Lord.

## 2. Between the Biblical Lines

The Bible: a collection of rules or an assurance of love?

Ironically enough, the Bible itself has played a part in this distortion. First, the Bible is being used in ways that it was never intended to be used. The Bible is being used as if it were an answer book, a rule book, a guide for every hour and every day of our life. That is not what it was intended to be. The Bible was the worshipping community's book, written by a people who wanted to express their faith in how God acted in history. The unspoken preface for Biblical books is always "This is how we see it." That preface is explicit in the gospels. The gospels are always called "the gospel according to..."; what that means is "This is how this faith community saw it." They do not say, "This is the absolute, not-to-be-challenged way it is." The wonderful thing is that as we read the gospels (I'm most familiar with those and I can talk about them best) we see very different pictures of Jesus in each one. There is no way to put those pictures together, because they are faith statements: "This is how we saw it and this is the way we responded to it."

The same principle holds in the Old Testament, with which I am not quite so familiar. But if one reads the history of the Israelite people in Kings and Chronicles, one receives different images of that history. These very different documents have been preserved because at some time in the life of the worshipping community they said something that was important to that community about the way their spiritual forefathers and mothers had seen the story. Nothing more was intended. We read George Fox, Hendrik Kraemer, Reinhold Niebuhr, or Henri Nouwen to be in touch with how they understood the action of God in history. But just imagine, two thousand years from now, some future community of faith saying of the writings of Fox, Kraemer, Niebuhr or Nouwen: "That's scripture; that's the way you are supposed to do it." They would be misusing those documents in the same way we frequently misuse the documents which have come down to us in the Bible.

It is important that we understand the Bible as a model for how we live out our lives, not as a rule book. The issue that the Bible raises is, in the light of what God has done in history, what kind of response do I make in my daily life? The response is the response for that moment because the situation in which I have to respond keeps changing. It is not helpful to take what others did in one cultural situation and make it a rule for another. The people of the Bible worked out their response in their situation, never dreaming that anybody was going to take that response as a rule for what



people were supposed to do twenty centuries later. What we have done is to make an idol out of the Bible, to make it the fourth person of the Trinity. I think St. Paul would have been shocked if he had known that people were going to take his letters and make them equal to God. To him the thought would have been idolatrous.

A careful reading of St. Paul reveals that he says different things at different times. There is a fluid quality in his theology. To construe him as a systematic theologian is to miss his greatness. He responded to the issue of the moment. He responded with intensity and very often with arrogance, but he responded to that moment in which he found himself. We are called to follow the model of his behavior and not the results of his behavior. We are called to wrestle as St. Paul wrestled, not to let his wrestling take the place of our own.

I realize that I am treading on dangerous ground, landmined by centuries of superstition and awe. Many people have the feeling that if you could reduce everything to rules there would be safety and uniformity and clarity. We could just follow the rules and not have to think for ourselves. That is what happened with the covenant. The law said, "Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work . . ." The problem then was that an endless number of rules were needed to define work. But rules will not solve the problem because there cannot be enough rules to take care of every minute of one's life. You cannot write rules fast enough to catch up with your living. Even with a word processor. We look at the Old Testament people and sneer at their legalism, and then we try exactly the same thing. I was studying the Beatitudes one weekend with a group of people who were trying very hard to decide exactly what it means to be poor.

The Bible cannot help me by giving me rules. The Bible has given me all the help it can by offering me the story of God acting in history. The Bible cannot tell me what to do on Monday morning, because the Bible tells me that there is a God who calls me to humanity, and my humanity means that I have to make decisions and live in the terror of making those decisions. But that is not the way we have read the Bible. We have flipped through it and picked out Second Timothy, third chapter, and we have found a verse. But that verse doesn't mean a thing cut loose from that whole story. Very rarely do we ponder that verse -- in the context of the total story.

We come to the Bible looking for the wrong thing. Luther cautioned us that the Bible is only the cradle in which the Christ child is laid. The Scripture points beyond itself to God. The reason we choose not to see it that way is that we

are terrified of freedom. That is the great sin of human beings. We will to have our life structured so that we will know every minute that we are right. We do that, however, in only one area, the religious area. We want to make sure that we have the right religion; then that frees us to do whatever we please in all the other areas of our lives. People who say the Bible is inerrant are looking for one place where there is absolute certainty. But the Bible is not that place. It points beyond itself. It points to God. Even though every single moment we may have to make terrifying decisions, we are not alone.

We tend to miss the one message the Bible offers us, that God loves us and has acted to redeem us. We are already saved. We are accepted. We are all right. We are free and we can use our freedom responsibly. Freedom always carries anxiety with it, because we may be wrong. There is no guarantee that we are going to be right. But the Biblical message is that we do not have to have the guarantee that we are going to be right; we have only the guarantee that we are loved. We are ultimately loved by God and we can never get beyond that love. The Biblical message is not a collection of rules, but an assurance of love.

The freedom that God gives is always in danger of being given away or taken away. There will always be people who think they know what's best for other people. Someone is always ordering the world for others' protection. I may claim my freedom but be very nervous about letting you have your freedom. So, for your own benefit, I take away your freedom. That is what we have done with the Bible. For the benefit of all those poor people who can't handle it, we have taken away their freedom. Unfortunately, many of those poor little people are perfectly happy to have it taken away.

There is much that has been left out of the Bible. I know it contains all that is necessary for salvation: the good news that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself. But the Bible doesn't tell us specifically how to live that salvation life from eight to four, four to midnight, midnight to morning. One of the reasons it doesn't tell us is that, despite the way it has been misused, the Bible was never meant to be a book of rules governing every moment of our life. Human beings had misunderstood that once, with the Ten Commandments, so in the second dispensation God came as a person. The Second Israel also took flight from the unbearable freedom and made rules out of every utterance of Jesus, every ecstasy of Paul and the other saints. Human beings, with our innate tendency to run out on our humanity, would have done this anyway, but it was made easier to do by the fact that the record is incomplete.

The Bible is the glorious story of how the people of faith



saw God acting in history. We need to respond to that story by asking ourselves, "Does it make enough sense to me that I want to risk living by it?" If our response to that question is "yes," then we live our lives according to the way we see that image of reality. In other words, if I believe that there is a loving God, who has created me and wants me to be part of a people who will carry the good news of the love of that God to the world, what difference does that make when I go to my office at 9 o'clock on Monday morning? What difference does it make in my office that I believe there is a loving God, that that God loves me, and that God loves all human beings exactly as that God loves me? What different kinds of decisions do I make? What am I called to do in that office? Possibly we will make decisions in the work situation that are different from responsible decisions other Christians make. Christians don't all come to the same conclusions, even though a lot of people would like it better if they did. There is a lot of fundamentalism in ethics that would say, "This is the right answer and we got it from the Bible." That was Ezra's approach: "If you are going to be a Jew, this is the way you have to do it." One reason Jesus had so much trouble was that he came saying we do not have to be literalistic about the ritual or the law. You don't have to wash your hands before you eat. The religious authorities were horrified. Well, we have other things that horrify us today. One is that somebody will talk about the Bible the way I am talking about it. For a lot of people, that is just not the way to talk about the Bible.

#### The untold story of the New Testament

The Bible, as written, is already the Church's book. We have the story of the early Church as a gathered community. What we do not have are the stories of what all those early Christians were doing when they were not gathered. What were those saints of Caesar's household doing in Caesar's household? Where were those Corinthians coming from when some arrived early and ate up all the food and some arrived late and complained about the leftovers? They had all kinds of jobs, and their life was more than going to church. It was not their activity in the gathered community that turned the world upside down. Their activity in the gathered community supported "The Way" that turned the world upside down. The powers that be never care how much religious people sing and pray together. That kind of insulating activity made Karl Marx dismiss religion as the opiate of the people. Kraemer has a powerful word of judgment on this point: "The modern world, by its victorious secularism, has domesticated the church into a 'reservation' for people with 'religious' needs, and the

church has largely accepted this domestication." No, the powers that be never care how much "religious" people sing and pray together. The threat arises when that singing and praying alerts the worshippers that things in the world are out of joint and that they are called to set them right.

The Bible is the Church's book, not only in the sense that it tells about the gathered community, but because it was produced by the Church and has been used by the Church to buttress the authority of the institution. For years the Bible was written in a language the ordinary worshipper could not read. It took the shedding of blood to get that collection of books translated into the vernacular. By the time the Bible was available in people's native tongues, the clergy had already hemmed it around with so much superstition and absolutism that lay people were afraid to read it. They were told and probably believed that their untutored minds could not grasp its holy mysteries. Even worse, the devil might lead them to question something they found in the Bible and they would be condemned to eternal hell fire. It seems such a tragedy that people died to get the Bible translated, and now people do not study it. Some people read it, but they rarely study it. The Bible might just as well still be in Greek or Latin for all it is known.

Even in the gospels you can see the beginnings of the process of institutionalization, the story of how "the people of God" became "the institution." The concern about the institution that marks the later Epistles is not yet there, but it is clear that it is the church that produced the gospels. We cannot ever get back to the Jesus of history. The flaw in the "Jesus of history" versus the "Christ of the Church" controversy was pointed out by Albert Schweitzer. We can know Jesus only by responding to the risen Christ in an act of faith. There is no way we can ever go beyond that act. The gospels themselves were the response of the people of faith to this new experience, the risen Christ. So, as I see it, the Church's fingerprints were on the record from the beginning, in the choice of what fragments were saved. What is saved is always a response. What do we believe about this? There is very little in the Bible about what we are to do, very little about actions apart from what we call "spiritual." St. Paul does say something about the marriage relationship. And there is some effort to deal with the work relationship, at least with that then-powerful institution, the relationship between slaves and masters. But Scripture describes the results of the organized community's decisions about what was right and wrong, not the individual wrestlings that took place.

There is a shift in focus in the New Testament. The shift occurs somewhere between the letters of Paul and the later



epistles, when the Church becomes the focus instead of the life of faith. But this shift is a movement from an unorganized response to the risen Christ to an organized response. The shape of the community was a little freer during the earliest periods of the Church. In the earlier writings we hear the community around Matthew saying, "This is how we saw Jesus," and the community around John saying, "This is how we saw Jesus," and Paul saying, "This is how I saw Jesus." In the later writings we hear, "This is how Jesus must be seen." In Acts one can begin to see the doctrines being formulated. Acts is a great description of the process of doctrines being formulated and decisions made about who is in and who is out. That is the kind of shift we have, and it was a necessary shift. That was the process by which the Christian community moved into institutionalization. If we are going to perpetuate the faith we have, we have to get it organized and cataloged so that people can know who is "in" and who is "out." It became very important to detect heresy.

The early Church was very much threatened by other kinds of religion. A great diversity of religions proliferated in the ancient world as they do in our modern age. So the early Christians had to have some way of saying, "Who belongs here? Who is with us?" That kind of activity is both very necessary and very dangerous, because the minute the question "Who is with us?" is asked, tests for membership begin. Tests for membership are always based on beliefs and creeds rather than on loving relationships with one another. We have a hard time creating clear criteria for membership on the basis of loving relationships. It is not surprising that people would pick up the Bible and decide that correct belief is the purpose of its use; not surprising, but tragic. The way we have often used the Bible is one more manifestation of human sin.

#### From Sunday Christians to Monday Christians: some hints

The books in the New Testament were written primarily for and about the gathered Church. But if we read between the lines we can find hints about how the New Testament people made sense out of all that on Monday morning when they went out to do all those other things that the Bible is almost silent about. For instance, we get some clues about how two social institutions, slavery and marriage, were understood in new ways.

People eventually overthrew slavery because they saw that if you really took the Bible seriously and you really did see yourself as the brother or sister in Christ of every other person, then slavery made no sense. Some are fond of quoting "Slaves be subject to your masters," but the word that shook slavery was Paul's word to Philemon: "Receive

Onesimus as a brother." Paul had a radically new understanding of the master-slave relationship after each one had accepted Christ. So there is a new word about slavery in the New Testament.

In the same way, Paul's new word about marriage is not the oft-quoted, "Wives be subject to your husbands," but his message to husbands and wives that each has an equal demand on the other and neither has the right to deny that demand. There we really hear Paul working out his understanding of what it means to be equal in Christ. The other quotations became more familiar to our ears because it was very convenient for slaveholders to quote Paul saying, "Slaves, obey your masters." Men have loved to repeat the line, "Wives, be subject to your husbands," but seldom quoted Paul's words about equality in relationships. We remember the rules, but we avoid the difficult wrestling.

It was Karl Marx's understanding of the Bible that contributed to his scathing criticism of a capitalistic system that kept so many people in poverty while a few were wealthy. Heeding the Biblical message leads to questions about our economic system. Many important changes in our society have come about because someone asked, "What does it mean that I believe in the Biblical message?" When someone takes that message very seriously, it is likely to turn the known world upside down. And, in my opinion, anyone who remains comfortable in the known world cannot be paying attention to the Biblical message.

We do not possess the stories of what those early Christians were doing when they were dispersed, but we do have some clues about the issues they confronted in their daily lives. Obviously the people in the early church were concerned about what it meant to pay taxes. That story has been left in the New Testament record because that was a troubling issue in the early Church. What was their responsibility as citizens? It is very interesting that Jesus did not answer questions like that. The answer to that question was thrown back on the person who asked it. You render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. We have taken Jesus' response and made it into a doctrine about the separation of Church and state. Jesus was not talking about the separation of Church and state. That's a modern issue. He was talking about the fact that we have to make decisions. We have to make decisions about what the ultimate authority in our lives is and how we live with lesser authorities. And our decisions have ambiguity, risk and questions as inescapable attendants. Jesus' response was relevant for those people and it is relevant for us. That part of Scripture is no pat answer; it stands as a challenge to exercise freedom. That conversation about paying taxes is a magnifi-



cent example of an issue that those New Testament Christians had to face.

We catch a glimpse of another daily issue when Paul talks about eating food presented to idols. Those Christians had to buy their food in the market and some of it had been offered to idols. Their problem was, "How do I know what to buy?" So Paul tried to help them to wrestle with that problem from their daily life: how do you operate in the marketplace? So we do catch glimpses of how those early Christians dealt with Monday morning issues. But what has happened to those wonderful passages that give us glimpses into those flesh and blood issues they were struggling with? We have transformed them into pious, churchy moralisms.

Those New Testament people did not face the same issues that we face. They lived in a different world. To suppose that every issue they had would be an issue for us is to deny the historicity, the particularity of our faith. Bible people lived in a world without telephones and TVs and computers. The Bible will not give us "how-to's" because that is not its purpose. What the Bible does is to lift up the God who was shown forth bodily in Jesus of Nazareth. We look to that God, and then we make our own decisions, under judgment and under grace.

#### What does the Bible have to say to my life?

There are some tools to help us ask that question about what the Bible has to do with my life in a new way. We need to study the Bible in groups, we need to use the commentaries, and we need to do a lot of searching on our own. First we need to try as nearly as we can to place ourselves in the situation of the first Christians. How did they see Jesus? Why did they see Jesus as the incarnation of God? Our next questions are, "How do I do that? What helps me to see that? What helps me to have that experience of facing the risen Christ?" Then we need to talk about those things within the Christian community. I really think people need to talk more about the meaning of their faith and listen to other people talk about their faith. Now here is where the institutional Church is important. The institutional Church has preserved this treasure of the faith and the community of people who can help us with our wrestling with meaning. We need to read the record of other Christians who have struggled and find out what they came up with. We need to be aware of the various ways in which people have responded to the Incarnation. And we need groups that are working at this series of tasks continually. We may not stay in the same group all the time. But all of us ought always to be involved with people who are struggling to come to understand the Biblical record, and

their lives in the light of that record.

We need to remember when we study the Bible that we are going to find differences among the authors. Just a little Bible reading shows that the faith statements of the people who wrote it are really very different. Peter's Epistles say something very different from Paul's letters. Bible study leads to the discovery of a richly variegated tradition.

Lay people need the confidence to struggle with the Bible and discuss it with one another without looking for someone who "has all the answers." We must learn to hear what our fellow students are saying with the expectation that another person will have another way of looking at it, rather than with eagerness to judge "right or wrong." I can look at another person's viewpoint and decide whether it is helpful to me. When I am studying a familiar passage with people, I always say, "Don't assume that you know all about this passage no matter how familiar it is, because we can learn from each other." Somebody here sees that passage in a way that no one else you have ever met sees it." All too often those familiar Biblical words are almost like background music. We do not confront them or allow them to confront us. Why is it good to study with other people? Someone in that group is not going to have heard that same music. I have seen it happen many times. Someone has an insight. We may feel shocked at first and then think: "Why, of course, that's a possibility. Here is one way of looking at it."

We meet Scripture too often in bits and pieces. How many people have sat in churches and heard Scripture read and paid no attention to it! They either did not understand the meaning of what was being read or they thought it had no particular meaning. Listening to Scripture seemed to be an empty ritual that really had nothing to do with their lives.

People are always asking about the Bible, "What does this have to do with my life?" Sometimes it is glowingly clear what it has to do with a person's life. Sometimes, though, we just keep mouthing the question, perhaps to shut off any possible answers. Then it does not have anything to do with our lives. The kind of answer we're often looking for is the kind of answer that will tell us what to do Monday morning at 9 o'clock.

It is not just that our twentieth century individualism leads us to ask a question that's different from the question that the New Testament people asked. They did ask that question, "What does it have to do with my life?" and they found out it had a lot to do with their lives. In answering that question they overturned the Roman world. They changed the world from the ancient world to the modern world. But the question is not asked enough now. In fact the question is discouraged. The powers that be will always discourage that



question, because if we ask, "What does it have to do with my life?" you may come to the conclusion, "It points out that my life is not the way it ought to be." And not only because of me individually. The answer is not just that I'm supposed to pray more, to love more. My life is not the way it ought to be because the systems that bind me are not the way they ought to be. And the systems, the principalities and powers do not want that kind of answer. If they have already co-opted the Church, people will ask only, "How does this make me more pious? How can I use this to make sure I get to heaven?" When I do Bible study with people, I listen to more irrelevant discussions about heaven. We spend more time talking about heaven than about earth, despite the fact that God came to earth.

An icon is that through which you look to God. The Bible is really an icon, because there never would have been any Bible at all if there had not been some significant life behind it. And the object of Bible study is to be confronted by that life.

The model for the ministry of the laity is the life of Jesus -- the Gospel behind the gospels. The written record is there because of the Life. Lay people need to learn to read the Bible to get behind the words to the Life that made the words worthy of being remembered. Lay people have learned to ask the question, "What does all this mean for my life?" but they have not learned to hear an answer except in the most narrow, pietistic form.

Lay people need to be weaned away from the seduction of the Church, the institution, to the service of the world. "God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son...." There is much to unpack in these words. Lay people need to be about unpacking them.

When they do respond to that Life, when they do ask what it means in their life and in their world, they will set about changing that world. They will take the power to be in ministry, and no institution will be able to stop them.

### 3. The New Reformation

#### Not a ticket to heaven

Lay people, as I hear them, are coming to church with the questions, "What is the right way to live? What are the right things to do?" These questions are what people are after, and they want some answers.

I think this is a basic misunderstanding like that which characterized the old dispensation, only worse. The Old Testament, as I read it, began with an awareness of a relationship with God. Many people today don't even start there; they seem to feel that they must try to achieve a relationship with God. They miss the point. God has already acted for them; it has already happened. They are already all right, acceptable, accepted. Salvation is not at stake. The Church as institution is not a way to get to be all right. God in Christ has already accomplished the work of salvation.

If the chief worry of the laity is getting into heaven, it is natural for them to regard clergy as the guardians of the pearly gates, the ones who have power to tell laity whether they are all right or not. Worrying about getting into heaven also reinforces looking at the Bible as a book of rules. We are thrown back from grace into law. "Getting into heaven" is our old way, traditionally, of saying what contemporaries mean by "finding acceptance," "getting to be OK," or "getting right with ourselves." It is interesting that our new expressions are so thin, lacking either poetry or a transcendent perspective.

If the Church is the way to get to heaven, the emphasis automatically shifts from the people of God to the Church as institution. The people of God are not all right the way they are. They need to be made all right and the institution is the means for shaping them up. When people are so conscious of how much they themselves need to be changed, they are not ready to begin to think about changing the world. They get thrown back into a concentration on their own inadequacies.

If we focus on trying to be all right, we are likely to concentrate on religious practices. We tend to have the feeling that if we do not follow certain rituals and obey certain laws, we will not get to heaven. The irony of that mindset is that the minute details become just as important as the really important things. We church people tend to care just as much about what color is hanging on the altar at a given time as about whether we are compassionate toward the poor, the sick, and the needy. We are sometimes more offended if the liturgy is not perfectly celebrated than we would be if 99.99% of the church's budget is spent on itself. We do not



often get upset about the ingrown character of a parish's programming, but we certainly got upset by any kind of liturgical reform. Again and again throughout the gospels, Jesus reminds people that those details really are of little importance. Those words reverberate through history. Tithing mint and cummin and forgetting the weightier matters of the law was not a problem exclusive to the New Testament synagogue; it's very present in modern churches.

When I say, "I went to church every Sunday in the year," that's definable. I can chalk those credits up. But if the final judgment is going to be based on whether my heart is a heart of flesh or a heart of stone, that is not definable; that takes us into some insecure areas. Seeing the church as a way to get to heaven reinforces the individualism of present day Christians. If the issue is how I am going to squeak through the pearly gates, I won't be very interested in getting my hands dirty trying to change the systems that support injustice. If my salvation is not accomplished, I have to be very busy trying to create my all-rightness through my own efforts. And, like all human beings, I feel more righteous when I find out that somebody else is wrong. That dynamic is very evident when we look at all the denominations. Each one is sure it is right and spends a lot of time proving the others are wrong. I recently met a man who belongs to the Church of God. He was a wonderful person, and it was a great experience to meet him. He told me a story about a member of his denomination who looked at Paul's salutation "to the church of God which is at Corinth," and concluded, "You see, the Church of God is in the Bible." Then he went through the rest of the New Testament and found eleven references to "the Church of God" in the Epistles. He then asked, "Are any of the other denominations mentioned in the Bible?" That to me was an extreme example of someone trying to be right and making everyone else wrong. But we all do it. All denominations try to trace their polity back to the New Testament Church. The Presbyterians are eager to find presbyters mentioned, and the Episcopalians are happy to find bishops -- just so many ways of saying, "We're right and you folks are wrong!"

#### "You are accepted": hard to accept

Why do we insist on trying to justify ourselves? What is it that is so very persistent in us that makes it so hard to accept the fact that we're accepted? First, our strange mixture of pride and self-hatred; and second, our misunderstanding of God. If we are accepted, and everybody else is, too, on what basis can we then claim distinction or superiority? I think we have some distaste for a God who is so permissive.

We really do like order and rules and the security those

structures provide. We can't bear chaos, and the Church as institution offers us a way to escape it. We love the feeling of belonging to an exclusive club. Groucho Marx had that wonderful line, "I wouldn't want to belong to a club that would accept me as a member." Our contemptuous feelings about ourselves keep us from accepting salvation as accomplished. Somehow we are convinced that we are not worth much, and we are so stubborn in our self-judgment that not even God can tell us that we are worth something. Earning our own salvation is costly, but the prize is specialness. John attacks this pride head-on. "If your heart condemn you," he says, "God is greater than your heart." If we admit that, we have no room left for pride. That is why we usually refuse to admit it.

A corollary of our inverted pride is our fear that the other person will exploit grace. We insist that we ourselves will not exploit it, but we suspect other people of being freeloaders. And so we have to shake them up -- for their own good, of course. This kind of fear is manifested in all the hostility toward recipients of welfare -- the really deeply ingrained fear that they will cheat if you don't hedge unearned benefits around with a lot of rules, and make them very difficult to get. Why should we be so suspicious of other people unless we really are unsure about our own trustworthiness? If God does not worry about being exploited, that seems foolish to us. Of course, by human standards it is foolish; that is why the Bible always tries to hold up a God who is not human. We cannot comprehend such a God, and so we are always trying to cut God down to comprehensible size. Some remarkable poems in the Old Testament say that God cannot be comprehended -- not because God is huge, but because "God's ways are not our ways," as the poet puts it. Although we are very worried about being taken advantage of, this prospect does not trouble the God of the Biblical revelation. Our fear is that there is only so much to go around, and someone will grab a bigger piece than they have a right to. Our sense of poverty and a limited supply leads us to this kind of thinking. Those people on welfare are going to cheat; they're not truly needy and they are going to take a piece of the pie that doesn't rightfully belong to them. When we see life that way, we aren't looking at a God of unlimited and overflowing richness.

#### Love is boundless

As that beautiful line in Juliet has it, "My love is boundless. The more I give to you, the more I have." That's the quality of love. The more you love, the more you are able to love. The more people you love, the more people you can love. If we find that to be true in our human experience, how much



more would that be true for God?

We may object that children growing up do not experience love as inexhaustible. Siblings feel that there is only so much to go around, and if my brother gets a lot of attention, there will not be much left for me. But why reduce God to human terms and cast love in one form only, the form of attention? I do think that a person has only so much attention to pay at any given moment. If I am looking at you, I cannot be looking at John. But the fact that I am not looking at John does not mean I do not love John at that moment. The problem lies in our definition of love; the terms in which we define love limit it. We need always to hear the Gospel telling us about a God who is very different from anything we can imagine.

It's so interesting the way we modern people talk in superior tones about how the ancient people thought about God in anthropomorphic terms. I think that today we try to reduce God to our understanding, to our experiences, and that is equally anthropomorphic. In the picture language of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) the images vary. If we are going to talk about God (and we must talk about God) then it seems to me we should be very careful constantly to use varying images, or else to be very clear that whatever image we are using is limited. We need to do that for ourselves when we are alone thinking, or aloud when we are talking to others. I was told once never to express an idea without prefacing it with "as I see it." I find the practice useful because it reminds me that there always have been and will be other views. Anthropomorphic though the Old Testament was, it gave us ever varying images: a light behind the cloud, a man walking in his garden, a mother hen brooding. A lot of ways to say the unsayable -- because when we talk about God, we say the unsayable.

So two things that keep us from being able to accept that we are accepted are a strange combination of self-hatred and pride, and some pretty primitive and limited ideas about how God operates.

### Living by faith

Here is another reality to remember: my belief that I am fully accepted, though I am unacceptable, is a faith statement. I can never prove it. It may not be true. The whole Biblical myth could be just a delusion. A risk is involved. But what the Christian community at its best is doing is living as if that myth were true. We are not going to find any validation of that myth in the world around us because the world marches to another drummer. We cannot talk about God only in terms of our experiences, because we are marching to a drummer that

says our experiences are only a part of reality, not the whole of it. And our interpretation of our experiences is always skewed and distorted by our self hatred/pride.

I have two choices. Either I make reality small and concrete and unequivocal enough that I can grasp it and own it. Or I admit that the truth is so far beyond what I can grasp and comprehend and own and control that my relationship with that truth is very tenuous. I have to walk by faith. I believe that while the Christian witness calls us to walk by faith, most of what we do in the institution denies that. The institution always moves toward making reality certain, pinning it down in liturgies, in organizational structures, in educational systems, in any way we can pin it down. Because of that tendency, the institution has to be broken open again and again. That breaking-open process doesn't happen often enough, but it is the thread through the Church's story. We need to go back and look at church history, because people are always tempted to cling to the idea of the Church as a way to get to be all right. The clergy are trained in that approach and the lay people accept it because that is all they have ever known. Note that I am making a distinction between what many people honestly believe they believe in their hearts and what they do corporately in the institution. Few clergy or lay people profess belief in a rule-making God. Indeed most clergy would be denied ordination if their examiners even suspected such a belief on their parts. No. The leaders of the church do talk and try to believe the grace game. But they play the law game. There's the rub -- the difference between religion of the lips and religion of action.

Being made right is not the church's work. That is God's work and that work is done. The work of salvation is finished. The unfinished part, the part that is ours, is to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, to work out what that means in the closing years of the twentieth century, in a world threatened by nuclear extinction, ravished by greed that secures the very rich at the expense of multitudes of the very poor, seething with age-old racial and religious hatreds.

This is the world we are called to turn upside down. In many ways it is very much like the world into which the incarnate Lord came, and in many ways it is very different. The major difference today is that "Christianity" is a powerful establishment. Religious establishments all act alike; they all arrogate to themselves the exclusive right to speak for God. Lay people must take upon themselves the awful burden of yielding that right to no one.

If our salvation is already accomplished, we will want to act that out in our lives everywhere without compartmentalizing them. If we are already all right, we can probably tolerate more ambiguity, freedom and chaos. For instance, we will



not be so concerned about who is in and who is out. And if we are already all right, we need not grasp for the kinds of certainty we can possess, but will know ourselves to be held by a certainty that is ungraspable. We will not leave church knowing just what we ought to do. If we come away from hearing a sermon and know exactly what to do, then it is possible that the sermon missed the point, because that sermon would have structured our lives. The sermon in which the Gospel is preached gives no rules and regulations about how to live our lives, but points to a great vision. I am always happiest when the preacher says, "This is how I see it; this is what I am called to do," and then I can decide that I am not called to march with that person; or I can decide that I am not called in that way. Even the person who knows "This is what I must do" knows it only for that moment. I may be called to do that on Monday, and I may not be called to do that on Tuesday. We are called to freedom, and the awfulness of decision. To know that we are accepted is to receive the gift of freedom. Love God and do as you please. Such freedom gets scary. We see too much space out there, so we tie things down very quickly. By the time we come to the written gospels, the figure of Jesus has already been tied down to a certain extent, but we can still see that free spirit moving through the New Testament. Christ's spirit cannot be tied down.

Now, I know we need some structure. There is something comforting in saying "This is the way we usually do it." Those little rituals structure our lives so that we have some containers for all the chaotic experience that goes rushing through. I would hate to wake up every single day and say, "Well now, here is this marvelous day. What shall I do today? Shall I start by brushing my teeth?" In fact, I think people who live in a totally unstructured way have set themselves up another structure. They have made anarchy God. But the love of structure can grow to the point where you have all banks and no river. The structure becomes the idol. The important thing, it seems to me, is to hold the structure loosely. As a servant. I think "servant" is a beautiful word, too, for institutions. Robert Greenleaf wrote a series of papers and books on the idea of servant, and one of them was on the institution as servant.\* The real definition of the Church as institution is servant. "Servant" is like the word "symbol." It points beyond itself, it is limited, it is finite, it has a purpose, but it is not ultimate. Neither servant nor symbol is ultimate reality. The institution is not ultimate. It points to God, when it is doing its job. When it begins to act like God, it has capitulated to fear, making itself an idol.

\*"The Institution as Servant," in Servant Leadership, Paulist Press, 1977.

If people really believed that the work of salvation has already been accomplished, how would it change the way they related to churches? I think they would participate fully in churches as institutions. They would serve on the boards. They would contribute their money. They would be faithful in attendance. But they would hold it all loosely. Just to give some concrete examples, they would not be devastated when you changed the form of worship or the hymnal. They would not consider all lost if you opened up the ordained ministry to women. It would not disturb them if some people found meaning in other denominations instead of the one they happen to belong to. There would be a kind of lightness in the way they encountered all those bits and pieces of ecclesiastical life.

The gift to them from the institution would be community. They would have a place where they were understood. No matter how peculiar and crazy they were, there would be somebody there who would understand them, somebody who would love them. And they would hear that message proclaimed, falteringly perhaps, but proclaimed on Sunday morning. The sacraments would give them the opportunity to participate in that continuing drama. And I think all those gifts from the church would be important to them, often vital. Even though people knew their salvation was accomplished, I do not think they would separate themselves from the institutional church. I think they would have a spirit and a lightness and a grace so that you would know they had a different quality of life. There would be no lightness about the way they encountered the essence of their call to be about the business of their Lord. With grace and humility, they would name the demons of oppression, care for the victims, march against the powers and principalities and constantly challenge the Church, the institution, to be the Church, the people of God.

They would be a leaven in the lump, not always recognized. While they would be very faithful in their participation, I think they would find it possible to bring judgment on the Church. Because the prophets in our midst know that their salvation is accomplished, they are free to say of any structure: "That's not helpful." I do not think they would necessarily be serving on the highest boards, although they might be so called. They might be very annoying people, so they might not get elected to anything. People who hold the institution lightly are not always celebrated by those who do not hold it lightly.

#### Called to be saints

To be called to be saints means we are called to be members of the household of God. That's what a saint is. A saint is



a person who knows that God has acted for him or for her definitively in Christ, that God has acted for lots of other people too, and that all those people make up the people of God of which I'm called to be a member.

When I, as a freechurchwoman, heard the Roman Catholic dictum "There is no salvation outside the Church," I was just furious. I thought that was Roman Catholic arrogance and I would have nothing to do with it. Since then I have learned the profound truth of that affirmation. The church is the people of God and there is no such thing as a solitary Christian. A Christian is a member of that body. A saint is not necessarily a good person or a wise person, but a saved person. Sainthood has been very much distorted to mean I'm called to work on all my faults and be more spiritual and pure and "gooder and gooder." That's another distortion of the Biblical message. Paul's instructions to the early Christians were instructions "downward." Because God has done this for you, giving you a new life, this is what that life is going to look like. Since God did this for you, therefore, here is how you act. Gradually, those descriptions became directives. "Saint" began to mean someone who successfully followed the directives and became a specially holy person. A scrupulous individual rather than a member of the body.

That was a denial of the meaning of sainthood as the New Testament people originally saw it. But lay people believed it. It was a way to make some people better than others and to take the others off the hook. If I'm not specially called, I don't have any responsibility. The Church had begun to consider the institutionally ordained as the only people who had calling. The rest of us had jobs.

During the time of the Black revolution when Blacks were marching on Selma and holding sit-ins in restaurants, the White people who joined them were generally ordained ministers. Some of their parishioners were furious. Many others sat back in the pews and thought they had taken a stand because their minister was down there marching, and they had given him leave to do that and paid his way. Actually going down there was his responsibility; that is what he was called to do, to make that kind of witness for the church (a witness that, for some, meant imprisonment or loss of life). And two decades later, lay people in the governing bodies of the land are overturning the victories won.

It has all gone so far astray! We have denominations making pronouncements, while all the church people sit back and congratulate themselves: "My, we've been noble! We've made a resolution." But if we took our sainthood seriously, we would know that we had missed the point, that sainthood meant our putting our own lives on the line.

I don't know how we slipped so easily into thinking that

sainthood meant being a very good person, that only a few people would ever make it, and that it was something that happened after death. All of that was contrary to the New Testament, where sainthood happened in life, right then. If we believe the whole point of the Church is to show us the way to get to be all right, that distorted idea of sainthood is understandable. It would make sense to believe that the institutional church has the right to say who is and who isn't a saint, that the church, rather than the cross of Christ determines who is a saint. Jesus' sacrifice was not enough, according to that view. We are always trying to add to Jesus' sacrifice.

Lay people need to claim the grace of his all-sufficient sacrifice, accept their acceptance, and, as the people of God, turn the church, the institution, around.



#### 4. The Ministry of the Laity

"Greater things than I do..."

I am increasingly convinced that the Biblical injunction "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to all nations" has been narrowed from our Lord's broad vision to just a churchy activity. In St. Mark's gospel, Jesus does not just come preaching the Kingdom. He comes as the embodiment of the Kingdom. Where he appears, life is different. I always think of this hymn stanza as a synopsis of the Jesus of Mark:

Hear him, ye deaf; his praise, ye dumb,

Your loosened tongues employ;

Ye blind, behold your Saviour come,

And leap, ye lame, for joy.

Where Jesus came, life was different. He proclaimed the Gospel by being the Gospel. "And greater things than I do shall you do," he said. It is not enough to heal the sick. Heal the systems that make them sick. It is not enough to visit the prisoners. Question the structures that imprison people. Some great churchmen have had this vision -- Martin Luther King, Reinhold Niebuhr, Walter Rauschenbush -- but the implementation of the vision is the ministry of the laity.

Christian economists must be about the business of asking: What are the systems and structures that will give dignity to all people? How can we bring those systems into being? Christian political scientists must be about the business of asking: How can life be so ordered that people will have increasing control over their own lives? What changes must be set in motion so that those dreams can become realities? And so on, in every sphere of life. Christians must be about the business of making real for every man, woman, and child the Kingdom that has come among us.

The ministry of the laity is being open and sensitive to every structure of society that puts a millstone around the neck of one of the least of these. As the poet William Blake put it,

I shall not sleep

Nor shall my sword rest in my hand

Till I have built Jerusalem

In England's green and pleasant land.

That's the ministry of the laity. Building Jerusalem where you are.

What would have to happen for some of these things to take place? What do laity have to do that might turn the situation around?

First, lay people need to become informed about what the faith actually is. Lay people have to be experts in the theo-

logical realm as well as in their own vocational realm. What kind of adult education do we laity need to be looking for that will help us build up that theological strength? I think lay people need to study the Bible and be cognizant about church history. We do not have to become scholars, but we need to be well enough educated to know that whatever form of polity our particular denomination practices is not sacrosanct, that it developed in response to certain historical events and that it is under the judgment of the faith like everything else, including the Bible. Any educational venture that brings lay people together to study seriously is a helpful intervention in the life of the church because out of serious study, questions arise.

Terms like ministry, church, faith, baptism need to be wrestled with, as if they have never been wrestled with before. The old containers will not do. New wine needs new wineskins. Small support groups need to be developed -- groups where lay people can have the freedom to doubt and challenge and wrestle. In Bible study groups, people can discover for themselves, for instance, that the nativity story is not at the heart of the Gospel. Insights like that can encourage us to ask ourselves, "What else have we been paying attention to that's really peripheral?" And in answering that question we are going to fumble; we are going to make some mistakes.

I recently received a card from a woman in Virginia, where I had been delivering some of my Biblical iconoclasm. She wrote, "I want you to tell me if I am off the track." She had gotten the idea that the resurrection was not essential to the Christian story. Well, she was off the track, of course, because what I had been saying was not that the resurrection was unessential, but that the form of the story in the Bible was not essential. But I think getting off the track is not so terrible; at least she was thinking. She and I are now in conversation. Now she knows she need not be in a garden or an upper room or by the sea to meet the risen Christ. She is beginning to understand that Magdalen's experience was not like Peter's and Peter's wasn't like the disciples' on the Emmaus road, that Paul's wasn't like any of them, and hers doesn't have to be like theirs, either.

And out of serious study, real questions arise. For example, the Church of the Saviour in Washington, DC, has accomplished a revolution within the institution simply by having committed ongoing cells of people who study together. They focus on the world, not the church. They focus on important things: families have nowhere to live, people are hungry, countries are going to war. They really deal with those issues and they do not care too much about institutional church structures. So there is one model of what lay people can do.



There is another in the Society of Friends, a lay movement. I find it fascinating that whenever lay people are really empowered, the issues of the world become their agenda. Now, I am sure that is a generalization. No doubt there are lay people who are missing the point as the ordained have often done, but those are two instances of lay people really getting at the heart of the matter. What is important in the gospel is a new world, not an institution. The institution should always be at the service of lay people in the world. It is a servant institution.

Study groups are one way of raising these questions. Liturgy is another place at which the questions can be raised.

A young woman I know who was on the worship committee in an Episcopal church tried very hard to have the congregation rise when the offering was brought forward. The custom was that the offering was brought forward and received by the priest, and then, when the priest lifted the bread, everyone stood up. My young friend said that the congregation's practice was the exact opposite of the witness that the movement in the liturgy was supposed to make: that when the offerings of the people were brought forth, the people stood up because that was their offering. Rising in response to the priest's action conveys the message that what the priest does at the altar is the important thing. We pay homage or respect to a holy thing rather than participating in the offering. When we participate in the offering, that means we are important, we give the offering of our lives. Asking questions like that about the liturgy could lead lay people to understand that this is our service, the work of the people.

Another liturgical form about which lay people ought to be raising questions is the way the gospel is read. In many churches, when a lay person reads the lesson, everybody stays seated. Then there is an impressive procession of the gospel into the pulpit, with the priest standing in front, the cross behind him or her, and candles on either side. It is the most impressive moment in the entire service, and only the priest can read that gospel. The ceremony is supposed to be exalting the gospel. What it does is exalt the ordained person. What a different witness it makes when the gospel is processed into the congregation. So you can look at the liturgy and ask, "What is being communicated here about the Gospel? About the laity?"

We can come at those questions from hymnology. We can study the hymns and ask, "What is it that these hymns are saying?" I often have people pay attention to hymns when I lead retreats. Some people read the words of the hymns for the first time.

We can always use ethics as a starting point. We can look at what is going on in the world today and ask, "What is to

be my response as a Christian? How do I become informed?"

There are many ways in which the educational program, the worship, or issues in society or the Church's life can provide lay people with opportunities to deepen their faith. During that great battle about the ordination of women in the Episcopal Church, it interested me that people studied what the ordained ministry was all about more than they ever had before. There were some serious questions raised. Anything that will get people excited, stir them up, so that they can question "What is it that we are trying to bear witness to?" can be an occasion for laity to grasp their true calling. The questions are there, all around us, all the time. Will we take the responsibility and authority to pay attention to them?

### Laity abdicate their authority

When we really study the Bible (and I make clear distinctions between studying the Bible and reading the Bible or using it devotionally), we will find out very soon that the Bible is the record, the witness, of the people of God about how God has acted in their lives. And that witness is borne by lay people. Although the beginnings of institutional development are clearly in the Bible, it is not an institutional book. There was no well-organized hierarchy. The Old Testament story starts out with a little stumbling band in the wilderness with a very gifted leader. Those travelers looked around at what was happening and they said, "That was God acting." That was a faith statement. It would have been possible to look around and see all kinds of other things going on. But that community said "This is God acting." Now the community that wrote the story down was not the original community that traveled through the wilderness, it was a later community that looked back on its life together and asked questions like "Who are we?" and "How did we come to be" and "What has shaped us?" The Old Testament people were a fairly fluid community of men and women, lay people and some ecclesiastical people, who saw themselves as the people of God. That is the subject of the Old Testament: the life of the people of God. And the being of the people of God went furthest astray when they gave over their being as the people of God to temple authority, ecclesiastical authority. The temptation was there even in the beginning. When they got scared in the wilderness they asked their priestly leader for a golden calf, a beautiful idol to reassure them.

When the people of God let someone else tell them what to do, when they should offer sacrifices and wash their hands and all that sort of thing, they lost their vision. The prophets came on the scene and said, "God does not want all those noisy hymns and all your incense." But finally, when ecclesi-



astical structure seemed to encompass everything, then came the great light that Jesus brought. He made it very clear that those structures were not the point. The next scene showed again a little bunch of lay people fumbling around, trying to figure out who Jesus was and how he could be the incarnation of God.

The story keeps repeating itself. Lay people become weary of the struggle, and they give over the responsibility to some kind of ecclesiastical hierarchy. It happens in the Hebrew Scriptures and it happens again in the New Testament. The last books of the New Testament show a fairly well-organized structure telling all the people what they must do at this time or that time -- exactly as the Old Testament ended with Ezra telling all the people what they must do at this time or that time.

Paul warned, "Let us not weary in well doing." It is so easy to get weary, because being a conscientious lay person is a struggle. It takes work. We have to keep fighting always against the institutional structure closing in.

The tendency toward increasing rigidity happens not only in religion; we do the same thing in secular life. The medical profession finds a new way to deal with illness and then the institution closes in and that becomes the only way. Perhaps the reason we have made so little headway so far against cancer is that the medical profession has concentrated on treating cancer rather than finding a cure for cancer. The institutional way is to preserve what we know; do not risk the unknown.

The economy is another area in which we give up the struggle. We lay people do not know what to do. We let the experts tell us. It is a very natural tendency. We just happen here to be concerned with the nature of the Church, but it is no different anywhere else.

Our tendency is to say, "Oh, I'm tired of struggling -- let someone else do it." In my opinion, this is another manifestation of the tendency toward sin that is deep in all of us. The minute you let someone else do it, that "someone else" will work to remain in power. So, when lay people say about their religion, "Well, the clergy know more about it, let them do it," then you tip the balance of power to the institutional Church. Lay people then say, "Well, who cares about the institutional Church?" and they go off to their jobs in organizations where that same kind of institutionalization has taken place.

I think that if lay people do not give up in the Church, if they fight for the insight that God is concerned about us as God's people, those same lay people will be out there making a difference in the world. When we give up in the Church, then we are saying that what is going on in the Church is not

really very relevant in the world. We are really saying that we do not believe that God can work God's mighty acts. And if we have no faith that God is still acting, we have no way of seeing God acting. So I think it is essential that lay people do continue to own not only their own vocational expertise but also their expertise as theologians. Unless lay people struggle to hold together all their worlds, religion cannot be what that word means: "that which ties it all together." When lay people give religion over to the clergy, it becomes an irrelevant little side issue, which is exactly what it is today -- a reservation, as Kraemer says, for those with specialized religious needs. We have our little ceremonies, we have some religious type saying a prayer when our president is inaugurated, but the administration that goes into action the next Monday cares little about that prayer. And, worse, the fellow who intones the little prayer is selected because he is not going to say anything that is going to upset anybody. Well-known evangelists can be hand in glove with Democratic presidents and Republican presidents and never say anything that could offend the powerful. The clerics that shake the establishment get pulled out. The Church was the handmaiden of the state way back in the Middle Ages, and before. That is what Amos was arguing about with Amaziah. But the Amaziahs of this world have always been rushing out to warn the kings saying, "Watch out for those people; they might upset things." They do.

Indifference is the natural response to timid, irrelevant religion. We must not confuse weariness with indifference. Most lay people are bored, rather than exhausted with the battle -- or else they are wearied by activities irrelevant to the real struggle. Reinhold Niebuhr described accurately what most lay people feel: "religion is no longer radical; religion is now irrelevant." People pop into church on Sunday morning to pay their dues. They have a good deal of religious superstition. But they are not weary. They are not struggling to bring their faith up against the issues of their lives.

Of course there has to be some way for the real weariness of lay people to be acknowledged and dealt with in ways that don't encourage them to abdicate their responsibility. When people grow really weary, that is what the church is for, that is what the sacraments are for, and that is what the gathered community is for. People who are weary from the battle need the Sabbath rest, a chance to withdraw, to "oscillate," as Bruce Reed puts it.

### Christians incognito

When lay people actively try to bring their faith into some relationship with the world about them, they are often regard-



ed by the Church as religious specialists. I think about a man like Bill Stringfellow, who really worked very hard to make his legal profession an expression of his faith, and who became one of the great radical theologians of the Church. We are likely to think of Stringfellow as a theologian, not a lawyer. But from my point of view it was as a lawyer that his struggle was most meaningful. I think of a person like Bill Diehl, who consults with the Lutheran Church in America and makes important contributions to "Laos in Ministry." Bill Diehl was a Bethlehem Steel executive who took the relation between his faith and his work very seriously. We are likely to think of Diehl as a churchman rather than as a businessman today. There's something insidious about the pull of the institution. It is unfortunate that we value these men more as church leaders than as probing lay people.

I think that Bruce Reed had a telling insight when he said that Christians need to go out on Monday morning into "the Kingdom of God" as doctors or sales clerks, not under the Christian label.

When I taught school, I never once talked about being a Christian. I hope I was operating as a Christian, from my commitment to the fact that my students were valuable and that there should be a certain integrity in the way we worked and that it made a difference in the world how we worked. But the content of my teaching was never about being a Christian. In fact, there were three instances in which I disappointed my Christian fellows for that very reason.

In the first instance they wanted to have a Bible club in the school and they asked me to be a co-sponsor. I struggled with the issue but decided not to do it. In the first place, I felt the school was not the appropriate place for Bible clubs. I believe the religious community is the place to study the religious faith. In the second instance, the teachers were going to form a little cell group in which they were going to come early in the morning, meet regularly as Christian teachers and strengthen one another for the day. I thought that was a wonderful idea, so I agreed to join the group. When I got there, however, I found what they really wanted to do was to convert the students. They were going to hand out little tracts during the school day. They were going to proselytize the Jewish students. Well, I didn't think that was what Christian teachers ought to do. I thought we ought to work on being good teachers, not "missionaries in the school."

The third event had to do with prayer in the public schools. I was with a group who thought all the Christian teachers ought to go out and lobby for prayer in the public schools. I had to conclude that precisely because I was a Christian I could not battle for prayer in the public schools. I know that a lot of people start talking about public prayer the

minute they think about being Christian. Some have that mind-set in Congress. Many Christian members of Congress get together and have a prayer breakfast. For me, that is not the point. I do not think parading piety is what makes a Christian congressman. Whether they are Christian or not, their job is to be out there campaigning against the arms race, against putting burdens on the backs of those least able to bear them, against the exploitation of resources. No matter what the label is -- Christian or Jewish or agnostic -- their integrity as members of Congress has to do with the stands they take. From my viewpoint, Bruce Reed is right when he says we should not go out in the world waving our Christian credentials. Unfortunately, evangelism has too often been reduced to parading labels rather than proclaiming with our lives the Life that led to a cross.

We often tend to think those New Testament people always identified themselves publicly as Christians. In fact, I think they were careful about when they let their faith be known. They made the witness only when there was a point to be made. The fish symbol was a secret way to reveal their allegiance to one another. So I am sure they did not go out saying everywhere and at all times "I am a Christian." But even if the early Christians had habitually proclaimed their allegiance openly, that would not tell us what we are supposed to be doing. We forget that we live in a very different world from the world they lived in. They lived in a world that was not Christian, so for them to proclaim their faith would have been a courageous stand. They might have ended up being eaten by a few lions the next afternoon. We, in contrast, live in a world in which Christianity is the norm. If I say I am a Christian, that isn't a startling statement; it says I go along with the status quo. So the last thing on earth I want to do is go out and announce randomly that I am a Christian, because I think that is easily misinterpreted. I need to ask myself very carefully what I will gain by the announcement. A cross or an accolade? (And please don't confuse unpopularity with the cross!)

### The true calling of laity

If laity are subjects and not objects, to use Kraemer's distinction, how do all the pieces fit together -- the role of the laity, the role of the clergy, and the purpose of the Church? When we come to the church building, the ordained leader has a very special role there. The pastor holds that church together. He or she has the primary responsibility for overseeing the work of that institution. Lay people can bear the chalice, serve on committees, even preach, but the ultimate responsibility for the institution belongs to that ordained person, who has chosen that responsibility and has been chosen



for it. I do not and should not have found responsibility for administering that institution. My primary responsibility is my job.

Lay people gather in the church to worship but also to learn. One of the more important activities that takes place in a church community is Christian education, for which clergy have the ultimate responsibility. As a lay person, I can teach classes, I can chair the Christian education program, but the ultimate responsibility for the educational direction of that community, as I see it, belongs to the ordained leader. I think it actually works that way. If the pastor is charismatic, the church is charismatic; if the pastor is existential, the church is existential. I think the clergy ought to be open enough, though, to have their vision under judgment. There is always more than one possible right answer. We only know in part.

The sacramental office belongs to the ordained person. I participate in that, but I do not see lay people as called to celebrate the mysteries. I know there are places where they do, and it's always interested me how those communities distinguish between ordained and non-ordained people, but I do not have to wrestle with that problem because I do not belong to that kind of religious community. But the idea that when the priest is at the altar he or she is no longer a person is not my theology. I like priests to look me in the eye when they give me the bread. I don't want them to stick it in my hand and move on like some disembodied floating spirit. But I do believe that for that moment the priest is in a peculiar way the bearer of the holy for me. I can be that for someone else in another time and in another way, but for that moment I think that is the ordained person's role.

And I believe it is also the calling of the ordained to know the story, to hold that story in our remembrance, to recall it in the educational program, to act out that drama in the sacrament, to hold that community together so that the word can always be preached, and the sacraments offered. Within that setting the lay person operates always in conjunction with the pastor -- teaching, counseling, administering.

Lay people carry out those functions in church, but to me they are always secondary functions for laity. The lay person's primary function is out there in the world. There is a problem when the church becomes the primary focus of their lives. I can remember that when I was most unhappy on my job, I was most active in the church. When I was escaping from my primary function, I was in the church day and night. When we see lay people doing that, we ought to ask the question, "Why is that person here every time the doors of the church open?" Something's wrong, either in the family, or somewhere else in that person's world. Somewhere the person is in trouble. I think such de-

votion to the institution on the part of a lay person is a danger signal. I suppose as long as this time of retreat to the church has as its purpose getting ready to go back out again, it may be useful. But that purpose can easily get lost, because the Church needs workers to do jobs. The minister is relieved and helped to have them there. Of course, there are lay people who work professionally for the Church and, therefore, they have in a different way the same kind of function as the ordained person. But for the majority of lay people the institutional Church is secondary. I think lay people working for the church are, to a certain extent, an anomaly. I am one of them now. It is always something of a painful experience for me when I attract lay people to do what I do. The gift I would find most affirming (ironically) is a lay person inspired to do what I say, not what I do.

Unfortunately, our churches have become so elaborate that they do need a great deal of work from lay people. The Kingdom of God is never going to march triumphantly as long as so much activity is concentrated in churches. Those "greater things than I do that you will do" need to be done by lay people in the world. Governments are never going to learn a better way to live together than blowing each other up every twenty or twenty-five years, until lay people are in positions of power, in the halls of government, in the structures of society, who have a vision that human beings can live together another way. If wars are ever going to stop, they are going to have to be stopped by lay people with a vision of the battle flags furled, people who have the vision and work hard to learn the skills to bring that about. And that would be a greater thing than Jesus was ever able to do, because the Roman empire was slashing right and left during his lifetime Wars did not stop.

Nations will never have the sensitivity to the poor of the world that makes them produce food wisely and distribute it fairly until lay people are in power who have a vision of new economic possibilities that embody the compassion of the Creator. "Be ye compassionate as your Father is compassionate" is an acceptable translation of Matthew 5:48.

Bread for the World is a group of Christians concerned about feeding people. They are not romantics. They do not collect little baskets for the poor and send missionaries out to deliver them. They go themselves to Congress and carry out a legislative program skillfully and consistently. There is a wonderful story about Jesus feeding the five thousand, but five thousand are a drop in the bucket compared to all the hungry people in the world. Bread for the World, actually a very small operation, is an example of the "greater things than I do" that only Christians can do. (Christians and people informed by Christians, because a lot of people do Chris-



tian things who are not Christian.) That is the kind of evangelism that excites me, and that is the ministry of the laity. Lay people have power. They have power in the secular world. And lay people often lose their power in the world when they feel they need to be ordained in order to have a significant ministry. The Church has not understood the power of laity. The Church has felt it had to make an impact on the world through what the clergy said or through institutional pronouncements. The Black Church bears witness to another possibility. The Black community was not fed as much on "pie in the sky" religion as the White community liked to think they were. They were talking about a very real world. They heard the message "You are worthwhile. You are just as good as a White person and you don't have to sit in the back of the bus." It was that kind of message fed into Blacks week after week by Black preachers that really communicated the Gospel and inaugurated the revolution. And that is what the Gospel really says, that regardless of who you are, you are worthy of the world's respect. In the face of the worst kind of deprivation, Black people held their communities together because they heard that message. Spirituals were a safe medium in which to put the message. But Blacks heard those spirituals very differently from the way Whites heard them. Black people knew they were singing revolutionary songs. The Black experience is a good example of what the Gospel message really does mean and can mean to lay people. I know too many sage you need to hear when you go to church. I know too many people who think they are not worthy, they are not accepted, and I think, "They've been going to church Sunday after Sunday and they never heard the message that they are worthy?"

We are worthy, we are the people of God, and we are called to change the world! Let's accept the authority that has been given to us.

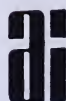
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Verna Dozier has a passion for helping the laity own the ministry to which they were commissioned at their baptism. Since her retirement after 32 years as a teacher of English in the public schools of the District of Columbia, she has been teaching people how to study the Bible, consulting with churches, and working with lay groups to encourage them to claim their authority.



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